

GREEN GARDENS¹

By FRANCES NOYES HART

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DAPHNE was singing to herself when she came through the painted gate in the back wall. She was singing partly because it was June, and Devon, and she was seventeen, and partly because she had caught a breath-taking glimpse of herself in the long mirror as she had flashed through the hall at home, and it seemed almost too good to be true that the radiant small person in the green muslin frock with the wreath of golden hair bound about her head, and the sea-blue eyes laughing back at her, was really Miss Daphne Chiltern. Incredible, incredible luck to look like that, half Dryad, half Kate Greenaway — she danced down the turf path to the herb-garden, swinging her great wicker basket and singing like a small mad thing.

"He promised to buy me a bonnie blue ribbon," carolled Daphne, all her own ribbons flying,

"He promised to buy me a bonnie blue ribbon,
He promised to buy me a bonnie blue ribbon
To tie up ——"

The song stopped as abruptly as though some one had struck it from her lips. A strange man was kneeling by the beehive in the herb-garden. He was looking at her over his shoulder, at once startled and amused, and she saw that he was wearing a rather shabby tweed suit and that his face was oddly brown against his close-cropped, tawny hair. He smiled, his teeth a strong flash of white.

"Hello!" he greeted her, in a tone at once casual and friendly.

Daphne returned the smile uncertainly. "Hello,"

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she replied gravely. The strange man rose easily to his feet, and she saw that he was very tall and carried his head rather splendidly, like the young bronze Greek in Uncle Roland's study at home. But his eyes — his eyes were strange — quite dark and burned out. The rest of him looked young and vivid and adventurous — but his eyes looked as though the adventure were over, though they were still questing.

"Were you looking for any one?" she asked, and the man shook his head, laughing.

"No one in particular, unless it was you."

Daphne's soft brow darkened. "It couldn't possibly have been me," she said in a rather stately small voice, "because, you see, I don't know you. Perhaps you didn't know that there is no one living in Green Gardens now?"

"Oh, yes, I knew. The Fanes have left for Ceylon, haven't they?"

"Sir Harry left two weeks ago, because he had to see the old governor before he sailed, but Lady Audrey only left last week. She had to close the London house, too, so there was a great deal to do."

"I see. And so Green Gardens is deserted?"

"It is sold," said Daphne, with a small quaver in her voice, "just this afternoon. I came over to say goodbye to it, and to get some mint and lavender from the garden."

"Sold?" repeated the man, and there was an agony of incredulity in the stunned whisper. He flung out his arm against the sun-warmed bricks of the high wall as though to hold off some invader. "No, no; they'd never dare to sell it."

"I'm glad you mind so much," said Daphne softly. "It's strange that nobody minds but us, isn't it? I cried at first — and then I thought that it would be happier if it wasn't lonely and empty, poor dear — and then, it was such a beautiful day, that I forgot to be unhappy."

The man bestowed a wretched smile on her. "You hardly conveyed the impression of unrelieved gloom as you came around that corner," he assured her.

"I — I haven't a very good memory for being unhappy," Daphne confessed remorsefully, a lovely and

guilty rose staining her to her brow at the memory of that exultant chant.

He threw back his head with a sudden shout of laughter.

"These are glad tidings! I'd rather find a pagan than a Puritan at Green Gardens any day. Let's both have a poor memory. Do you mind if I smoke?"

"No," she replied, "but do you mind if I ask you what you are doing here?"

"Not a bit." He lit the stubby brown pipe, curving his hand dexterously to shelter it from the little breeze. He had the most beautiful hands that she had ever seen, slim and brown and fine — they looked as though they would be miraculously strong — and miraculously gentle. "I came to see — I came to see whether there was 'honey still for tea,' Mistress Dryad!"

"Honey — for tea?" she echoed wonderingly; "was that why you were looking at the hive?"

He puffed meditatively, "Well — partly. It's a quotation from a poem. Ever read Rupert Brooke?"

"Oh, yes, yes." Her voice tripped in its eagerness. "I know one by heart —"

"If I should die think only this of me:

(That there's some corner of a foreign field

(That is forever England. There shall be —"

He cut in on the magical little voice roughly.

"Ah, what damned nonsense! Do you suppose he's happy, in his foreign field, that golden lover? Why shouldn't even the dead be homesick? No, no — he was sick for home in Germany when he wrote that poem of mine — he's sicker for it in Heaven, I'll warrant." He pulled himself up swiftly at the look of amazement in Daphne's eyes. "I've clean forgotten my manners," he confessed ruefully. "No, don't get that flying look in your eyes — I swear that I'll be good. It's a long time — it's a long time since I've talked to any one who needed gentleness. If you knew what need I had of it, you'd stay a little while, I think."

"Of course, I'll stay," she said. "I'd love to, if you want me to."

"I want you to more than I've ever wanted anything that I can remember." His tone was so matter-of-fact

that Daphne thought that she must have imagined the words. "Now, can't we make ourselves comfortable for a little while? I'd feel safer if you weren't standing there ready for instant flight! Here's a nice bit of grass — and the wall for a back ——"

Daphne glanced anxiously at the green muslin frock. "It's — it's pretty hard to be comfortable without cushions," she submitted diffidently.

The man yielded again to laughter. "Are even Dryads afraid to spoil their frocks? Cushions it shall be. There are some extra ones in the chest in the East Indian room, aren't there? "

Daphne let the basket slip through her fingers, her eyes black through sheer surprise.

"But how did you know — how did you know about the lacquer chest?" she whispered breathlessly.

"Oh, devil take me for a blundering ass!" He stood considering her forlornly for a moment, and then shrugged his shoulders, with the brilliant and disarming smile. "The game's up, thanks to my inspired lunacy! But I'm going to trust you not to say that you've seen me. I know about the lacquer chest because I always kept my marbles there."

"Are you — are you Stephen Fane? "

At the awed whisper the man bowed low, all mocking grace, his hand on his heart — the sun burnishing his tawny head.

"Oh-h!" breathed Daphne. She bent to pick up the wicker basket, her small face white and hard.

"Wait!" said Stephen Fane. His face was white and hard too. "You are right to go — entirely, absolutely right — but I am going to beg you to stay. I don't know what you've heard about me — however vile it is, it's less than the truth ——"

"I have heard nothing of you," said Daphne, holding her gold-wreathed head high, "but five years ago I was not allowed to come to Green Gardens for weeks because I mentioned your name. I was told that it was not a name to pass decent lips."

Something terrible leaped in those burned-out eyes — and died.

"I had not thought they would use their hate to lash a child," he said. "They were quite right — and you, too. Good night."

"Good night," replied Daphne clearly. She started down the path, but at its bend she turned to look back — because she was seventeen, and it was June, and she remembered his laughter. He was standing quite still by the golden straw beehive, but he had thrown one arm across his eyes, as though to shut out some intolerable sight. And then, with a soft little rush she was standing beside him.

"How — how do we get the cushions?" she demanded breathlessly.

Stephen Fane dropped his arm, and Daphne drew back a little at the sudden blaze of wonder in his face.

"Oh," he whispered voicelessly. "Oh, you Loveliness!" He took a step toward her, and then stood still, clinching his brown hands. Then he thrust them deep in his pockets, standing very straight. "I do think," he said carefully, "I do think you had better go. The fact that I have tried to make you stay simply proves the particular type of rotter that I am. Good-by — I'll never forget that you came back."

"I am not going," said Daphne sternly. "Not if you beg me. Not if you are a devil out of hell. Because you need me. And no matter how many wicked things you have done, there can't be anything as wicked as going away when some one needs you. How do we get the cushions?"

"Oh, my wise Dryad!" His voice broke on laughter, but Daphne saw that his lashes were suddenly bright with tears. "Stay, then — why, even I cannot harm you. God himself can't grudge me this little space of wonder — he knows how far I've come for it — how I've fought and struggled and ached to win it — how in dirty lands and dirty places I've dreamed of summer twilight in a still garden — and England, England!"

"Didn't you dream of me?" asked Daphne wistfully, with a little catch of reproach.

He laughed again, unsteadily. "Why, who could ever dream of you, my Wonder? You are a thousand, thousand dreams come true."

Daphne bestowed on him a tremulous and radiant smile. "Please let us get the cushions. I think I am a little tired."

"And I am a graceless fool! There used to be a pane of glass cut out in one of the south casement windows. Shall we try that?"

"Please, yes. How did you find it, Stephen?" She saw again that thrill of wonder on his face, but his voice was quite steady.

"I didn't find it; I did it! It was uncommonly useful, getting in that way sometimes, I can tell you. And, by the Lord Harry, here it is. Wait a minute, Loveliness — I'll get through and open the south door for you — no chance that way of spoiling the frock." He swung himself up with the swift, sure grace of a cat, smiled at her — vanished — it was hardly a minute later that she heard the bolts dragging back in the south door, and he flung it wide.

The sunlight streamed into the deep hall and stretched hesitant fingers into the dusty quiet of the great East Indian room, gilding the soft tones of the faded chintz, touching very gently the polished furniture and the dim prints on the walls. He swung across the threshold without a word, Daphne tiptoeing behind him.

"How still it is," he said in a hushed voice. "How sweet it smells!"

"It's the potpurri in the Canton jars," she told him shyly. "I always made it every summer for Lady Audrey — she thought I did it better than any one else. I think so too." She flushed at the mirth in his eyes, but held her ground sturdily. "Flowers are sweeter for you if you love them — even dead ones," she explained bravely.

"They would be dead indeed, if they were not sweet for you." Her cheeks burned bright at the low intensity of his voice, but he turned suddenly away. "Oh, there she sails — there she sails still, my beauty. Isn't she the proud one though — straight into the wind!" He hung over the little ship model, thrilled as any child. "*The Flying Lady* — see where it's painted on her? Grandfather gave it to me when I was seven — he had it from his father when he was six. Lord, how proud I was!"

He stood back to see it better, frowning a little. "One of those ropes is wrong; any fool could tell that—" His hands hovered over it for a moment—dropped. "No matter—the new owners are probably not seafarers! The lacquer chest is at the far end, isn't it? Yes, here. Are three enough—four? We're off!" But still he lingered, sweeping the great room with his dark eyes. "It's full of all kinds of junk—they never liked it—no period, you see. I had the run of it—I loved it as though it were alive; it was alive, for me. From Elizabeth's day down, all the family adventurers brought their treasures here—beaten gold and hammered silver—mother-of-pearl and peacock feathers, strange woods and stranger spices, porcelains and embroideries and blown glass. There was always an adventurer somewhere in each generation—and however far he wandered, he came back to Green Gardens to bring his treasures home. When I was a yellow-headed imp of Satan, hiding my marbles in the lacquer chest, I used to swear that when I grew up I would bring home the finest treasure of all, if I had to search the world from end to end. And now the last adventurer has come home to Green Gardens—and he has searched the world from end to end—and he is empty-handed."

"No, no," whispered Daphne. "He has brought home the greatest treasure of all, that adventurer. He has brought home the beaten gold of his love, and the hammered silver of his dreams—and he has brought them from very far."

"He had brought greater treasures than those to you, lucky room," said the last of the adventurers. "You can never be sad again—you will always be gay and proud—because for just one moment he brought you the gold of her hair and the silver of her voice."

"He is talking great nonsense, room," said a very small voice, "but it is beautiful nonsense, and I am a wicked girl, and I hope that he will talk some more. And please, I think we will go into the garden and see."

All the way back down the flagged path to the herb-garden they were quiet—even after he had arranged the cushions against the rose-red wall, even after he had

stretched out at full length beside her and lighted another pipe.

After a while he said, staring at the straw hive: "There used to be a jolly little fat brown one that was a great pal of mine. How long do bees live?"

"I don't know," she answered vaguely, and after a long pause, full of quiet, pleasant odors from the beegarden, and the sleepy happy noises of small things tucking themselves away for the night, and the faint but poignant drift of tobacco smoke, she asked: "What was it about 'honey still for tea'?"

"Oh, that!" He raised himself on one elbow so that he could see her better. "It was a poem I came across while I was in East Africa; some one sent a copy of Rupert Brooke's things to a chap out there, and this one fastened itself around me like a vise. It starts where he's sitting in a cafe in Berlin with a lot of German Jews around him, swallowing down their beer; and suddenly he remembers. All the lost, unforgettable beauty comes back to him in that dirty place; it gets him by the throat. It got me, too.

"Ah, God! to see the branches stir
Across the moon at Grantchester!
To smell the thrilling-sweet and rotten
Unforgettable, unforgotten
River-smell, and hear the breeze
Sobbing in the little trees.
Oh, is the water sweet and cool,
Gentle and brown, above the pool?
And laughs the immortal river still
Under the mill, under the mill?
Say, is there Beauty yet to find?
And Certainty? and Quiet kind?
Deep meadows yet, for to forget
The lies, and truths, and pain? — oh, yet
Stands the Church clock at ten to three?
And is there honey still for tea?'"

"That's beautiful," she said, "but it hurts."

"Thank God you'll never know how it hurts, little Golden Heart in quiet gardens. But for some of us, caught like rats in the trap of the ugly fever we called living, it

was black torture and yet our dear delight to remember the deep meadows we had lost — to wonder if there was honey still for tea. ”

“ Stephen, won’t you tell me about it — won’t that help? ”

And suddenly some one else looked at her through those haunted eyes — a little boy, terrified and forsaken. “ Oh, I have no right to soil you with it. But I came back to tell some one about it — I had to, I had to. I had to wait until father and Audrey went away. I knew they’d hate to see me — she was my stepmother, you know, and she always loathed me, and he never cared. In East Africa I used to stay awake at night thinking that I might die, and that no one in England would ever care — no one would know how I had loved her. It was worse than dying to think that.”

“ But why couldn’t you come back to Green Gardens — why couldn’t you make them see, Stephen? ”

“ Why, what was there to see? When they sent me down from Oxford for that dirty little affair, I was only nineteen — and they told me I had disgraced my name and Green Gardens and my country — and I went mad with pride and shame, and swore I’d drag their precious name through the dirt of every country in the world. And I did — and I did.”

His head was buried in his arms, but Daphne heard. It seemed strange indeed to her that she felt no shrinking and no terror; only great pity for what he had lost, great grief for what he might have had. For a minute she forgot that she was Daphne, the heedless and gay-hearted, and that he was a broken and an evil man. For a minute he was a little lad, and she was his lost mother.

“ Don’t mind, Stephen,” she whispered to him, “ don’t mind. Now you have come home — now it is all done with, that ugliness. Please, please don’t mind.”

“ No, no,” said the stricken voice, “ you don’t know, you don’t know, thank God. But I swear I’ve paid — I swear, I swear I have. When the others used to take their dirty drugs to make them forget, they would dream of strange paradises, unknown heavens — but through the haze and mist that they brought, I would remember —

I would remember." The filth and the squalor and vileness would fade and dissolve — and I would see the sun-dial, with the yellow roses on it, warm in the sun, and smell the clove pinks in the kitchen border, and touch the cresses by the brook, cool and green and wet. All the sullen drums and whining flutes would sink to silence, and I would hear the little yellow-headed cousin of the vicar's singing in the twilight, singing, 'There is a lady, sweet and kind' and 'Weep you no more, sad fountains' and 'Hark, hark, the lark.' And the small painted yellow faces and the little wicked hands and perfumed fans would vanish and I would see again the gay beauty of the lady who hung above the mantel in the long drawing-room, the lady who laughed across the centuries in her white muslin frock, with eyes that matched the blue ribbon in her wind-blown curls — the lady who was as young and lovely as England, for all the years! Oh, I would remember, I would remember! It was twilight, and I was hurrying home through the dusk after tennis at the rectory; there was a bell ringing quietly somewhere and a moth flying by brushed against my face with velvet — and I could smell the hawthorn hedge glimmering white, and see the first star swinging low above the trees, and lower still, and brighter still, the lights of home.— And then before my very eyes, they would fade, they would fade, dimmer and dimmer — they would flicker and go out, and I would be back again, with tawdriness and shame and vileness fast about me — and I would pay."

"But now you have paid enough," Daphne told him. "Oh, surely, surely — you have paid enough. Now you have come home — now you can forget."

"No," said Stephen Fane. "Now I must go."

"Go?" At the small startled echo he raised his head.

"What else?" he asked. "Did you think that I would stay?"

"But I do not want you to go." Her lips were white, but she spoke very clearly.

Stephen Fane never moved but his eyes, dark and wondering, rested on her like a caress.

"Oh, my little Loveliness, what dream is this?"

"You must not go away again, you must not."

"I am baser than I thought," he said, very low. "I have made you pity me, I who have forfeited your lovely pity this long time. It cannot even touch me now. I have sat here like a dark Othello telling tales to a small white Desdemona, and you, God help me, have thought me tragic and abused. You shall not think that. In a few minutes I will be gone — I will not have you waste a dream on me. Listen — there is nothing vile that I have not done — nothing, do you hear? Not clean sin, like murder — I have cheated at cards, and played with loaded dice, and stolen the rings off the fingers of an Argentine Jewess who —" His voice twisted and broke before the lovely mercy in the frightened eyes that still met his so bravely.

"But why, Stephen?"

"So that I could buy my dreams. So that I could purchase peace with little dabs of brown in a pipe-bowl, little puffs of white in the palm of my hand, little drops of liquid on a ball of cotton. So that I could drug myself with dirt — and forget the dirt and remember England."

He rose to his feet with that swift grace of his, and Daphne rose too, slowly.

"I am going now; will you walk to the gate with me?"

He matched his long step to hers, watching the troubled wonder on her small white face intently.

"How old are you, my Dryad?"

"I am seventeen."

"Seventeen! Oh, God be good to us, I had forgotten that one could be seventeen. What's that?"

He paused, suddenly alert, listening to a distant whistle, sweet on the summer air.

"Oh, that — that is Robin."

"Ah —" His smile flashed, tender and ironic. "And who is Robin?"

"He is — just Robin. He is down from Cambridge for a week, and I told him that he might walk home with me."

"Then I must be off quickly. Is he coming to this gate?"

"No, to the south one."

"Listen to me, my Dryad — are you listening?"
For her face was turned away.

"Yes," said Daphne.

"You are going to forget me — to forget this afternoon — to forget everything but Robin whistling through the summer twilight."

"No," said Daphne.

"Yes; because you have a very poor memory about unhappy things! You told me so. But just for a minute after I have gone, you will remember that now all is very well with me, because I have found the deep meadows — and honey still for tea — and you. You are to remember that for just one minute — will you? And now good-by —"

She tried to say the words, but she could not. For a moment he stood staring down at the white pathos of the small face, and then he turned away. But when he came to the gate, he paused and put his arms about the wall, as though he would never let it go, laying his cheek against the sun-warmed bricks, his eyes fast closed. The whistling came nearer, and he stirred, put his hand on the little painted gate, vaulted across it lightly, and was gone. She turned at Robin's quick step on the walk.

"Ready, dear? What are you staring at?"

"Nothing! Robin — Robin, did you ever hear of Stephen Fane?"

He nodded grimly.

"Do you know — do you know what he he is doing now?"

"Doing now?" He stared at her blankly. "What on earth do you mean? Why, he's been dead for months — killed in the campaign in East Africa — only decent thing he ever did in his life. Why?"

Daphne never stirred. She stood quite still, staring at the painted gate. Then she said, very carefully: "Some one thought — some one thought that they had seen him — quite lately."

Robin laughed comfortingly. "No use looking so scared about it, my blessed child. Perhaps they did. The War Office made all kinds of ghastly blunders — it was a quick step from 'missing in action' to 'killed.' And he'd probably would have been jolly glad of a chance to

drop out quietly and have every one think he was done for."

Daphne never took her eyes from the gate. "Yes," she said quietly, "I suppose he would. Will you get my basket, Robin? I left it by the beehive. There are some cushions that belong in the East Indian room, too. The south door is open."

When he had gone, she stood shaking for a moment, listening to his footsteps die away, and then she flew to the gate, searching the twilight desperately with straining eyes. There was no one there — no one at all — but then the turn in the lane would have hidden him by now. And suddenly terror fell from her like a cloak.

She turned swiftly to the brick wall, straining up, up on tiptoes, to lay her cheek against its roughened surface, to touch it very gently with her lips. She could hear Robin whistling down the path but she did not turn. She was bidding farewell to Green Gardens — and the last adventurer.